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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed using vertical teaming as a way to organize multi-year curriculum planning for academically talented adolescents. Vertical teams include educators from different grade levels in a given discipline who work cooperatively to develop and implement a vertically aligned program aimed at helping students acquire the skills necessary for success in the Advanced Placement Program. In such a team, the benchmark used to align the curriculum is the Advanced Placement examination which anchors the student outcome expectation. The purpose the AP Vertical Team is to include students who might not otherwise participate in the Advanced Placement program, including students of color or students from low-income homes. The second purpose of the team organization is to develop appropriate curriculum for each grade level. Curriculum examples are provided to illustrate the use of vertical teams in English literature. The teams are highlighted to illustrate that teachers who work together toward a common goal use locally developed strategies to facilitate their curriculum planning and that teachers at each grade level in the team can make a contribution to the advanced student's understanding and appreciation of complex ideas in a discipline. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

Connecting the Curriculum for Excellence: English Vertical Teams

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In both comedy and curriculum, timing is everything.

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For capable students, time really is everything. In the classroom, time can be used for challenging instruction or time can be marked by the monotonous tick-tock of the clock. Using time wisely on behalf of talented learners involves coordinating knowledge and skills across grade levels. Students who learn at an accelerated pace require that teachers think beyond the curriculum building blocks of individual units within a school calendar year (VanTassel-Baska, 1998). To differentiate the curriculum for capable secondary students effectively, teachers must plan for the educational trajectory of talented students across several years (Robinson, 1994).

Curriculum Connections through Scope and Sequence. Traditionally, connecting the curriculum was conceptualized as scope and sequence, and educators wrestled with the questions of what to teach and when to teach it (Glatthorn, 1994). Even now, scope and sequence considerations continue to be embodied in charts accompanying textbooks. More recently, however, decisions about what to teach and when to teach it have evolved into the concept of curriculum alignment (English, 1992). In the curriculum alignment permutation, district or state curriculum frameworks are usually the documents laying out what to teach, when to teach it and what outcomes to expect from students. (The more enlightened of the state curriculum frameworks focus on desired student outcomes and leave the particulars of how teachers enable students to reach them to the local school.) Such state frameworks are recognizable to any teacher. They are usually created by committees. They are usually lengthy. They are usually in large, three-ring binders. They outline skills, content and outcomes by grade level or by clusters of grade levels. They are often shelved rather than living documents. In all fairness to them and to the teachers and administrators who worked to create them, curriculum frameworks are an effort to bring order to the frequently messy business of classroom instruction. The most comprehensive alignment frameworks include an expected performance from the student, a means of documenting that performance, and the enabling curriculum.

Curriculum alignment sounds elegant, but how do real teachers in real classrooms translate the idea into action? More specifically, if we are interested in the kind of alignment that spans years rather than units or grading periods, how do teachers plan across grade levels? The architecture of most schools and the widespread commitment to grade levels as familiar curriculum break points do not encourage multi-year planning. Nevertheless, advanced students who push the instructional envelope will push their teachers to "keep ahead" of them. Multi-year curriculum planning by teachers who work together in a school can assist them in meeting the learning needs of talented students (Robinson, Dickerson & McCallister, 1999).

Vertical Teaming. One way to organize multi-year curriculum planning for academically talented adolescents is through the use of a vertical team. Vertical teams include teachers usually within content domains who collaborate to plan and implement curriculum. Recently, we have begun to look at issues of scope and sequence through a particular type of vertical team, the Advanced Placement vertical team. As defined by the College Board, an Advanced Placement (AP) Vertical Team is a group of educators from different grade levels in a given discipline who work cooperatively to develop and implement a vertically aligned program aimed at helping students acquire the skills necessary for success in the Advanced Placement Program (College Board, 1996). In such a team, the benchmark used to align the curriculum is the Advanced Placement examination which anchors the student outcome expectation. Such examinations are voluntary, but they can be used to establish rigorous standards (Kelley, 1994). All teachers from the middle school through the high school are conversant with the expectations for performance represented by the examination.

Two key issues are addressed by the AP Vertical Team. First, the purpose of the AP Vertical Team is to include students who might not otherwise participate in the Advanced Placement program. As with many initiatives in gifted education, the concern for including students of color or students from low-income homes is openly stated. If middle school and junior high school culturally diverse students are exposed to and encouraged early to set their sights on attaining college credit while they remain in secondary school, they may be more likely to accept that challenge in their junior and senior years. The second issue is that the purpose of the team organization is to develop appropriate curriculum for each grade level. It is not to teach

"baby" AP to middle school students, but rather to systematically identify skills and content that enable students to be successful in a climate of higher expectations. The seamless curriculum, then, is stitched together grade level by grade level under the direction of a team of teachers working to make curriculum connections for their students.

Curriculum Examples from the Real World. My examples today come from the discipline of English Literature and from a team of teachers which spans grade three through grade twelve. Using a question from the 1999 Advanced Placement examination in English Literature and Composition, I traced the enabling instructional activities used by the teachers in the elementary, middle school and early high school grades which prepared students to meet the challenge of a college level benchmark.

The examination question I have selected to share focuses on the development of characterization in novels and dramatic works. Characterization is an important "big idea" in the study of literature. In its most sophisticated form, characterization can be used to illustrate or to illuminate the theme of a work of literary fiction. However, to reach such an understanding or to be able to analyze the element of characterization independently in an unfamiliar text, students (even talented ones) need opportunities to read and discuss literary selections with complex characters long before they reach high school. The following examples from the English vertical team in the Pulaski County Special School District in Little Rock, Arkansas demonstrate how teachers articulated a set of instructional learnings about characterization across multiple grade levels.

Characterization in the Benchmark. First, let's examine the benchmark question which was used in 1999 and has been released by College Board. The question begins by introducing a quotation, poses a question about characters in conflict, and concludes with a non-prescriptive list of 27 novels and plays that the student might consider in selecting the character about whom to write.

> The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, "No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man's mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time."

> From a novel or play choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict within one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. You may use one of the novels or plays listed below or another novel or play of similar literary quality.

A list of 27 suggestions follows the Sterne quotation and the question posed about characterization. The suggestions include a range of works which span centuries and cultures--from **Antigone** to **Raisin in the Sun**. Students can make choices about which work and which character within that work will be the focus of their writing.

Perhaps because I have a fondness for 18th century British literature (considered by many readers to be an acquired taste), I found this question truly engaging. Laurence Sterne, a quirky clergyman wrote an early and outrageous form of a stream of consciousness novel; however, in this excerpt Sterne is serious. Conflict is a plaguing thing, but it is also the stuff of great literature. Characters in conflict have the power to show the reader something about the imaginary person in the novel or play, but they also have the power to reveal something about the reader, too. Identification with a skillfully drawn literary character transports us to other worlds and then back to our own where we arrive with more insight than when we left it. Truly, characterization is a "big idea" in the study, engagement and enjoyment of literature. However, the benchmark assessment goes one further and asks the student how the conflicted character mirrors the meaning of the novel or play as a whole. The advanced learner who responds skillfully to this kind of a challenging question does not arrive at such a performance level by studying characterization in a couple of short stories in the fall semester of the senior year. Deep understanding of characterization and the power it has to convey theme and meaning is built over time with the aid of teachers who know what kinds of curricular experiences to afford their students as they move through the grades from elementary to high school.

Let's do a little analysis of our own by examining the kinds of instructional activities the Pulaski County teachers developed by working collegially as a vertical team. As a side bar, the three schools represented on this elementary to high school team offered an advanced curriculum for students in an urban, multicultural district. In contrast to many Advanced Placement vertical

teams, the Pulaski County team began at the early grades and moved up until the team spanned grades three through twelve. Here are selected examples from the work of that team.

Grade Three. In examining curriculum documents from the district, I found that several teachers began "character study" by grade three. A representative list of the third grade reading selections included: **The Little House in the Big Woods, Bunnicula, Charlotte's Web, Ben and Me, And Then What Happened Paul Revere**, and **Velveteen Rabbit**. One of the representative activities used at the third grade level asked students to "Compare the main characters in **Sarah, Plain and Tall** and **The Little House in the Big Woods**." The students read **Little House** and viewed **Sarah** on video. Persons familiar with both works know the obvious--the main characters were girls uprooted from their homes and living in a frontier setting. At the third grade level, the teacher asked students to look for similarities--an elementary version of "compare" in the standard Compare and Contrast essay.

Grade Six. Now, let's jump to sixth grade. Here the teacher team had placed works **like Julie of the Wolves, Slake's Limbo, James and the Giant Peach, Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze, The Red Pony** and **The Hobbitt**. At this level, one of the representative activities asked students to "discuss the changes that occur in Bilbo's character. Use specific examples to support your ideas. " In this activity, we can see two further refinements in the understanding of characterization. First, the students are asked to consider how a character changes. The main character of **The Hobbitt**, Mr. Bilbo Baggins, is an excellent example of a character who changes throughout the course of the novel. The difference between characters who change (round) and characters who do not change (flat) is an important distinction for young literary scholars to grasp. Authors use both types of characters extensively, but for different reasons. Round characters usually communicate the message of the story in the ways they change. Flat characters are often used to communicate a single characteristic or insight about people; they are common in comic or humorous works. In contrast to round characters who often serve as the protagonist or main character, flat characters are often part of the backdrop or landscape of the story. Quest novels like Tolkein's **The Hobbitt** and its sequels, **The Ring Trilogy**, make use of both types of characters. This activity focuses on the changes that occur in a round character. In addition, students are asked to support their ideas about Bilbo's changes with specific examples

from the text. Thus, they are developing the skill of close reading as well as an understanding of characterization.

Grade Eight. In grade eight, the English team provided several choices designed to coordinate with the students' study of American history. For example, the team suggested the following choices for a Colonial era novel: **A Gathering of Days**, **The Witch of Blackbird Pond**, or **Tituba of Salem Village**. To include a Civil War era novel, the team suggested a choice from among **Across Five Aprils**, **The Red Badge of Courage**, **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass**, or **The Killer Angels**. Students also read **To Kill a Mockingbird, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**, and the play, **A Raisin in the Sun**. Finally, at this grade level students read both frontier novels, **Shane** and **O Pioneers !** To explore characterization at this level, teacher Mary Kathryn Stein, the eighth grade member of the English vertical team describes the following:

> In eighth grade students read two novels with strong heroic models in conjunction with their study of American history and the settling of the plains. Students read **Shane** by Jack Schaefer, which is a classic Western story of a hero who goes through the process of redeeming himself. It is a very male story having only one female character who is one-dimensional. Students then read **O Pioneers!** by Willa Cather which has a strong heroine, Alexandra. Before reading **Shane**, the students brainstorm their current heroes and heroines and identify the characteristics of a hero. One of the topics of group discussion on the novel is to describe and provide examples of how Shane fits the definition of a hero. Following the reading of **O Pioneers!**, students encounter the same question about Alexandra and they begin to make connections about these two heroic models. These discussion questions in turn become essay questions on the novels. The gender contrast in heroic characters is especially appealing to middle school students.

Mary Kathryn is especially fond of the pairings of these two works because of the treatment of girl characters by the two authors. In **Shane**, the girl cooks; in **O Pioneers !**, the girl runs the ranch (Stein, personal communication).

The above set of activities described by Mary Kathryn again encourages a deeper understanding of characterization through the use of comparison and contrast. Recall that in third grade, this team introduced comparisons between characters in different works with **Little House in the Big Woods** and **Sarah, Plain and Tall**. However, at this level, students are asked

to find the differences and the similarities in two different works, with two different prose styles, across characters with different genders and they are asked to find both similarities (compare) and differences (contrast) between the two protagonists.

Grade Ten. By tenth grade, students were expected to have an understanding of the psychological complexities of characters in literature. In this particular school, World Literature was the focus of Sophomore English, and the texts introduced at this grade reflected a cultural diversity as well as a broad sweep in the time represented. The works placed at this grade level included epic poems like **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** and **Beowulf**, dramatic literature such as **Macbeth** and **A Doll's House** and several novels--**One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**, **Cry the Beloved Country**, **Tale of Two Cities**, **Don Quixote** and **Les Miserables**. The novels provided rich opportunities for exploring the human condition. To encourage an understanding of characterization, Missye Tyler, the 10th grade English teacher, developed the following prompt:

> In many of works of literature, a character undergoes an epiphany or transformation. Choose one character from Victor Hugo's **Les Miserables** who experiences such an epiphany. In a well-developed essay, discuss the epiphany and explain how it contributes to the overall meaning of the work.

Missye's assignment is an excellent example of encouraging students to think about the complexities of compelling literary characters. In talking with her about this writing prompt, Missye commented that more than one of the complex characters in the novel undergoes an epiphany. She noted that she is always interested in the choice a student makes. The less straightforward the choice, the more interesting the student's writing often becomes (Tyler, personal communication).

Strategies for Connecting the Curriculum. Skillfully articulated curriculum from grade three through grade twelve is not accomplished overnight. The examples of an aligned set of activities to provide students with the tools for analyzing and the contexts for identifying with complex literary characters are the outgrowth of a team who collaborated on curriculum development over a period of years.

Teams who are just beginning to work together to align their curriculum benefit from some strategies used by experienced vertical teams. Here are two related strategies shared by an English vertical team from Crosby, Texas. One strategy was used during the initial stages of the team's formation; the other is a strategy to organize team decision making when changes in the curriculum are likely. In both cases, the strategies were shared by the current team leader, 10th grade English teacher, Ann Jackson.

The Hang-Up. The team referred to this strategy as Literature: A Starting Point; I dubbed it the Hang-Up because the team used chart paper and tape to visually organize their curriculum connections. The Hang-Up is used early in the formation of a team when the group needs to overcome the barriers of isolation. It is entirely possible that team members who teach in the high school may be unaware of what literary works are being taught in the feeder middle and junior high schools. A vertical team which spans more than one building would find this initial planning activity useful.

Teachers are convened for a work session and asked to list the major literary pieces, literary terms and specific skills they teach on chart paper. The lists of pieces, terms and skills are posted around the room with the grade level "clumps" clearly identified. Teachers then get out of their chairs, stroll around the room and note (on sticky notes if the team desires) the overlap and gaps in their curriculum choices. After teachers individually note the overlap and gaps, a team member leads the group in a sit-down discussion of what curriculum connections and disconnects they uncovered. According to Ann Jackson, the team considered three major dimensions: literary genres, time periods and authors. In other words, did the curriculum focus on poetry and overlook novels? Did the curriculum focus on modern literature and overlook works written before 1800? Did the curriculum include multiple selections by Shakespeare but nothing by Kate Chopin?

The Hang-Up presented two foci for teacher discussion. First, when the team found gaps, the teachers proceeded to brainstorm a list of literary pieces that might be incorporated into the curriculum of they identified skills that might be missing from the current scope and sequence. These brainstormed lists were saved for later curriculum planning sessions. Second,

and much more difficult, when teachers found overlap in the curriculum, they had to sit down and talk. Over time, teachers tend to select personal literary favorites, and teams found specific pieces being taught at more than one grade level. The proprietary interest of an individual teacher in particular works would become a stumbling block for teams seeking to align the curriculum. Unfortunately, discussions about the literary canon can become heated--the canon becomes a cannon. Using a structured strategy like the Hang-Up for discussion can help a team overcome differences of literary opinion. The Crosby team commented that the same strategy was used for literary terms and skills. However, they noted that they had better luck when they started with the literary selections first. Talking about the pieces they taught gave them early common ground. The Hang-Up helps the team identify overlaps and gaps, but other strategies are needed when teachers think through the curriculum choices they make.

Text Rationale. The Crosby team used a second kind of planning strategy to increase communication among themselves and to enhance curriculum alignment. Teachers on the team were encouraged to suggest new pieces systematically and used a one page organizer called the Text Rationale to do so (Jackson, personal communication). The organizer included the obvious information necessary for the team to evaluate a suggestion: title, author, grade or course, theme/unit/time the text will be used. Next, the Text Rationale offered choices in the way the proposed text might be used. The recommending teacher could check all that applied. The text might be:

studied by the whole class,
studied by small groups,
placed on a recommended independent reading list,
placed in a classroom library,
recommended to individual students,
or other (in which case the recommending teacher was asked to explain).

The range of possibilities is a good barometer of the varied kinds of reading experiences offered in the program and the variety of ways that teachers engaged their students with literature. Again, there is a sense of choice and opportunity incorporated into the curriculum planning by the teachers. Finally, the recommending teacher was asked to comment on three considerations

for the benefit of the team. First, the recommending teacher was asked to offer a rationale for the suggested text. Specifically, the teachers were asked to enumerate the "ways in which the text is especially appropriate for students in this class." Further, they were asked to discuss "ways in which the text is especially pertinent to the objectives of this course and/or unit." Finally, teachers were encouraged to consider "special problems that might arise in relation to the text and some planned activities which will handle these problems."

The Text Rationale is an organizing strategy for teams with some history of working together to align the curriculum. It is a strategy that would be especially useful during the mid-career of a team. In a mid-career team, the teachers have had opportunities to engage in initial planning, to test out the placement of particular content and skills, and to ferret out new ideas to use. The Text Rationale helps busy teachers make curriculum connections across grade levels systematically, so there is less danger of drift in the curriculum implementation. It is also a way for teachers to integrate new works and to keep instruction fresh for students.

Summary. In conclusion, advanced students need curriculum opportunities that take them seamlessly across multiple grade levels. To prepare the curriculum seedbed for advanced learning, teachers need to make curriculum connections across time. Using the Advanced Placement examination as a benchmark for student performance, teacher teams can work backward from a worthy expectation. Their task will be a challenging one. Individual teachers are very likely to hold differing conceptions of curriculum and beliefs about the nature of instruction (Pajares, 1992). How teachers are able to negotiate these differences to create a consistent curricular opportunity is an important educational phenomenon for us to understand. We need more opportunities to observe teacher teams in action (Gallagher, 1994). The teams from Pulaski County and Crosby demonstrate that teachers who work together toward a common goal use locally developed strategies to facilitate their curriculum planning. Teachers at each grade level in the team can make a contribution to the advanced student's understanding and appreciation of complex ideas in a discipline. Teachers can "connect" on behalf of students when they connect the curriculum for excellence.

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